Growing Up Gramercy

We were not in the middle of a normal childhood, yet none of us were sure since it was the only childhood we would ever have. For all we knew other men were coming home and shouting to their families, "Stand by for a pharmacist," or "Stand by for a chiropractor". – **Pat Conroy**

There are many advantages of growing up as a Service Brat – perhaps the strongest is the diversity of location and friends as the family moves from station to station every few years. Except for personal relationships, the moves happen magically as someone else does the ordering, the packing, most of the deciding and the worrying – but one of the disadvantages comes later in Life when someone asks casually, "So – where are you from?" A fellow brat describes the adventure and the quandary:

> I love meeting new people, going new places and trying new things. But I've never, in 22 years, been able to meet someone new and answer the question, "Where are you from?" without slight hesitation.
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> Why? Because I'm a military brat, and all military kids go through the exact same thing.
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> Do we say where we were born, where we first remember living, where we lived the longest amount of time or where we went to high school?
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> The chances are, all four of those would have different answers. I was born in New Jersey, I first remember living in Virginia, I lived the longest amount of time in a different part of Virginia and I went to high school in Florida.

As a Navy Brat, I was born in Washington, D.C. (this in itself is weird when every form you fill out for the rest of your life insists that your place of birth must be entered as "City, State"). I first remember living in Indianapolis, but I enjoyed most of my remembered youth on Gramercy Blvd in Houston.

Our Dad retired from the Navy in Indianapolis in 1950 and we took our final move as a family to some far off land called Texas. There was economic and personal rationale behind that decision: as Commanding Officer of the Naval Ordnance Plant Indianapolis (NOPI), Dad had developed a friendship and a business relationship with Herb Allen, the CEO of Cameron Iron Works on Post Oak Road in Houston. Cameron did the machining and forging for rockets like the Honest John that was developed for the Navy. Herb offered Dad a job and after leaving 33 E. 39th St. in Indianapolis Indiana, Daddy and Mother went house hunting while we were all at Camp Stonycroft in Shelby, Michigan. They bought the Gramercy Blvd. house for $21,000, the first and only home they ever owned.

2307 Gramercy Blvd was the first residence our parents ever owned. It was two stories with the three bedrooms on the second floor. Our parents had their own large bedroom with an en suite bathroom which we kids never saw; the Big Sisters shared a bedroom, and little brother Pete and I had bunk beds in our small room. Penny reminds me: "Upon moving to Houston Texas, it was (patriotic) Daddy who painted the bunk beds of Penny and Patti the color blue and painted the bunk beds of Mike and Pete plus their dresser the color red." I had the lower bunk and would try to bounce Pete out of bed by pushing up with my legs. I was only successful once – it was a challenge. We four kids shared the one bathroom – no problem (at least for Pete and me). We all remembered our home phone number forever: **MOnroe** 5-2608

We had neighbors with kids up and down Gramercy: right across the street were the Chalmers, with kids Howard and Rodney (Roddy); next to them was Frankie Burdett (sisters Nancy and Bonnie); further down was Frank Kelly (sister Carolyn); on our side of the street was Carl and Chris Faught (sister Melanie); right next to us was the Lavins, a Jewish family with no kids who complained that my pet rabbits attracted rodents like rats; but next to them, and just this side of Carl, was ***The Vacant Lot***.

Oh, what a treasure to have a Vacant Lot on our street. Every day coming home from school, hurrying to finish up my homework so I could go outside and play with my friends on The Vacant Lot. From Howard:

> I recall seemingly endless touch football games on the then-vacant lot next door to the Slavin's house. I also recall the disappointment when Abe Murr and family built that strange, one-story house on our playground.

Frank Kelly was the best athlete of us – most of us had the new 26" wheel bicycles, but Frank had a 24 incher that he could outpace us through the neighborhood. Once Frank hit a 'home run' in our pickup baseball games, and it actually traveled across the street and hit a window air conditioner, a luxury not all enjoyed, and left a physical dent. Wow! A neighborhood legend was born.

We would ride our bikes through the Southeast Houston area, with one far destination being the Glenn McCarthy estate, surrounded by high wall and rumored to have wild dogs chained up to unleash upon us interlopers. McCarthy was a famed oilman who had built the Shamrock Hotel in 1949 where my sisters now were lifeguards. He had garnered national fame and inspired the fictional character Jett Rink in Edna Ferber's 1952 novel *Giant* which, in 1956, became a film starring James Dean in the role.

Howard Chalmers owned the only football between all of us kids. Our touch football games only ended when "Spin and Marty" (1955-1957) came on the black-and-white TV at the Chalmers house, and Howard would take his football and head home. Some of us didn't even have a TV set. I hated Spin and Marty.

Howard recalls,

> My strongest Blackledge-Chalmers memory came when Captain Blackledge took me and you, and Roddy and Pete deep-sea fishing in the Aransas Pass area. After a sleepless night, we five crowded on a cabin cruiser and ventured out on the rough and rolling Gulf to catch whales. As I recall, we stopped first near an off-shore oil platform, just as a worker threw a bucket of fish parts or something gross not too far from our boat. Shortly thereafter, you or Pete caught the first fish, and in the process of reeling it in, someone became seriously seasick. And, that started a chain reaction that had Mike, Pete and Roddy hanging overboard for the rest of the voyage. Somehow, I did not get sick, but neither did I catch anything. Vivid, wonderful memories of horrible circumstances. I always respected your Dad for suppressing his desire to laugh aloud as the scene unfolded around this Navy veteran.

Yes, that deep sea fishing expedition in Port Aransas. The four of us kids were all bunked in one room, and were horse playing, having pillow fights well into the shank of the evening until my Dad suddenly

appeared at the door, in full parent mode. "Knock it off! You kids quiet down! We're getting up early tomorrow!"

And we were awakened at something like 4:30 am and taken to a diner for pancakes. Pancakes at 4:30 am! What a bad idea! But I dutifully ate 'em, and that's what I lost later on the boat.

Once I departed Gramercy Blvd in July 1959 for Annapolis and Mother Bancroft, my brother Pete ruled the roost. Unlike the days when we had a house full of siblings, Pete was now clearly the center of attention, and my parents' attitude changed entirely. Pete was allowed to have a dirt-bike motorcycle, a pellet gun, and – gasp – a .22 rifle! This led to experiences well outside civility, such as his "Armadillo Adventure":

> When I was about 12 years old, growing up in Houston, the Chalmers family across the street would often take me with them when they went to their ranch for the weekend. Their son Roddy and I were best friends ---- and we would go hunting with our .22 rifles in the thickly wooded areas which surrounded their ranch. I would proudly bring home the skins of rattlesnakes and copperheads which I shot there.
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> One Saturday, Roddy and I saw a large armadillo (an animal indigenous and somewhat unique to Texas, which looks like a gigantic rat with a thick leathery shell, long claws, and beady red flashing eyes) --- about two feet in length and weighing approximately 20 pounds --- lumbering across the open ground in the distance. I decided to capture it, yelling to Roddy as I raced ahead. The armadillo apparently decided it couldn't outrun me, so it started digging into the ground (a primary armadillo defense).
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> I grabbed the armadillo by its armored tail, but it was such an incredibly strong digger that it was literally pulling me down into the hole it was digging. Fortunately, Roddy grabbed onto me and was able to get his two large Labrador Retriever hunting dogs to start digging on either side of the armadillo. Between the 4 of us, we were finally able to extricate the recalcitrant armadillo from its refuge --- and I hoisted it triumphantly into the air.
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> Somehow, I was able to talk my hosts into letting me take the armadillo home with me as a pet. When I got home, I put my new pet in a metal garbage can which my family kept in the garage --- but I neglected to mention it to my parents. Our garage was adjacent to our house, and was where our washer and dryer were located.
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> Later that day, my mother came out to the garage to do some laundry. Hearing a strange "thump-thump-thump" emanating from the metal garbage can (as the armadillo was furiously banging from side-to-side), my mother peered into the metal garbage can to see what was causing the racket. Seeing a pointy nose, sharp claws, with two flashing red eyes staring back at her, she let out a scream which could be heard two blocks away.
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> Once her seemingly-endless screaming had subsided, and my father had managed to peel her off the ceiling, I was sternly ordered to "Get rid of that creature." So I dutifully evicted my armadillo from the metal-garbage-can-condominium which I had secured for him, transported him to some nearby woods, and tearfully waved goodbye as he hastily trundled off into his new environment.
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> He no doubt needed time to recover from his PTSD, but I am sure he became quite the celebrity to his new forest-mates, regaling them with the tale of his capture and incarceration by two-legged aliens. Perhaps his story even made the front page of the Armadillo Enquirer!

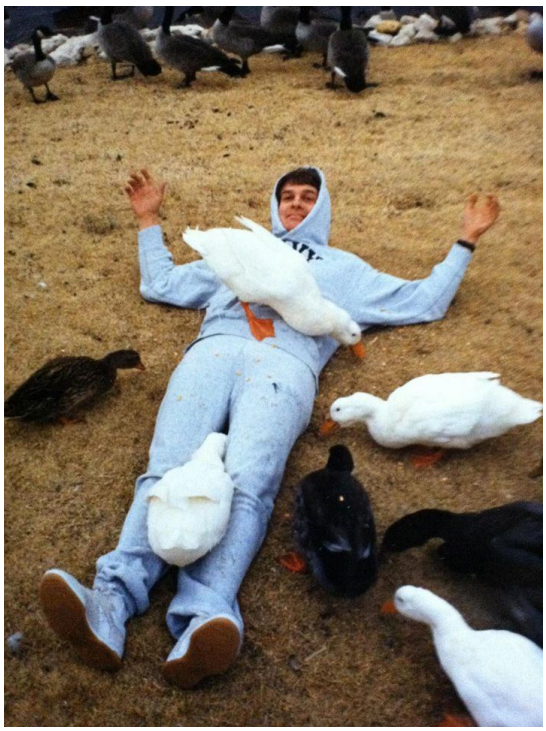
Soon Pete entered Mirabeau B. Lamar, the same High School where his twin sisters and his big brother had graduated and left a trail. Even more difficult, our Mother was now a Foreign Language teacher at Lamar. Pete continued to make a name for himself, as demonstrated in his High School Duck Tail:

Growing up in Texas, we had only two seasons: Summer and February. Therefore my formative Christmases were often wonderfully warm. When I was a Senior at Lamar High School in Houston, there was a girl named Sue in my class who absolutely LOVED ducks --- constantly talking about them and even wearing duck-shaped jewelry pins. So I decided to give her the ultimate Christmas present: a live duck!

Armed with a loaf of Wonder Bread, I drove over to Hermann Park --- a 440 acre urban park which had a large pond richly inhabited by ducks. I treacherously began throwing out pieces of bread to the ducks, drawing them nearer and nearer to me with each toss, until one audacious duck came unwisely close --- at which time I grabbed the hapless creature, ran with it to my car, threw it into the back seat, and started driving to Sue's house.

What I had failed to consider was that ducks, when considerably upset, tend to dramatically evacuate their bowels. So as I am furiously speeding down Houston streets to reach Sue's house, the duck is equally furiously flying about the inside of my car and ejecting remnants of everything it had eaten for the past two days. By the time I reached Sue's house, the inside of my beloved and previously immaculate '57 Chevy looked like a gang of brown paint-ballers had an indoor shoot-out.

Chagrined but undaunted, I rushed to Sue's door carrying the wildly flapping and quacking creature --- only to have the door answered by Sue's mother. She was not amused. But Sue suddenly appeared behind her, and could not stop laughing uproariously. Having successfully made my unique Christmas present known to Sue, I drove back to Hermann Park and released my feathery captive. He no doubt had a special PTSD story with which to regale his children and grand-ducks .....about being plucked from his watery sanctuary by the Ted Bundy of Duckdom.



Years later, I decided to do penance for my fowl transgression by prostrating myself at the webbed feet of the Texas Duck Civilization. I posted to my Facebook page a picture of me with a revengeful gaggle of ducks doing their Nancy Sinatra impression on my chest, inviting family and friends to suggest titles/hashtags for the picture. To "prime the pump", I offered a plethora of potential titles of my own: #Lame Duck Session, #Fowl Experience, #Getting Down, #Crumby Story, #Wise Quackers, #Drake Dancing, #Dabbling In Ducknapping, #Suffering A Malardy, #Loafing Around, #3 Ducks and an Old Coot, #Pondzi Scheme, #Getting Web Enabled.

That contest was won by Blackledge Family Queen Of Punnery Anne Woods for her multiple submissions: #Feeling Down In The Mouth, #Ducking The Challenge, #Duck, Duck, Goose, #Down But Not Out, #Duck And Cover, and #Pete Gets The Bill, with Honorable Mention going to my brother-in-law and Justice On The California Court Of Appeals, The Honorable Fred Woods, for his earthy submission "If it craps like a duck....".